

2010

Impactful Management Research: The Importance of Finding the Voice of Practice in Management Research

Howard THOMAS

Singapore Management University, howardthomas@smu.edu.sg

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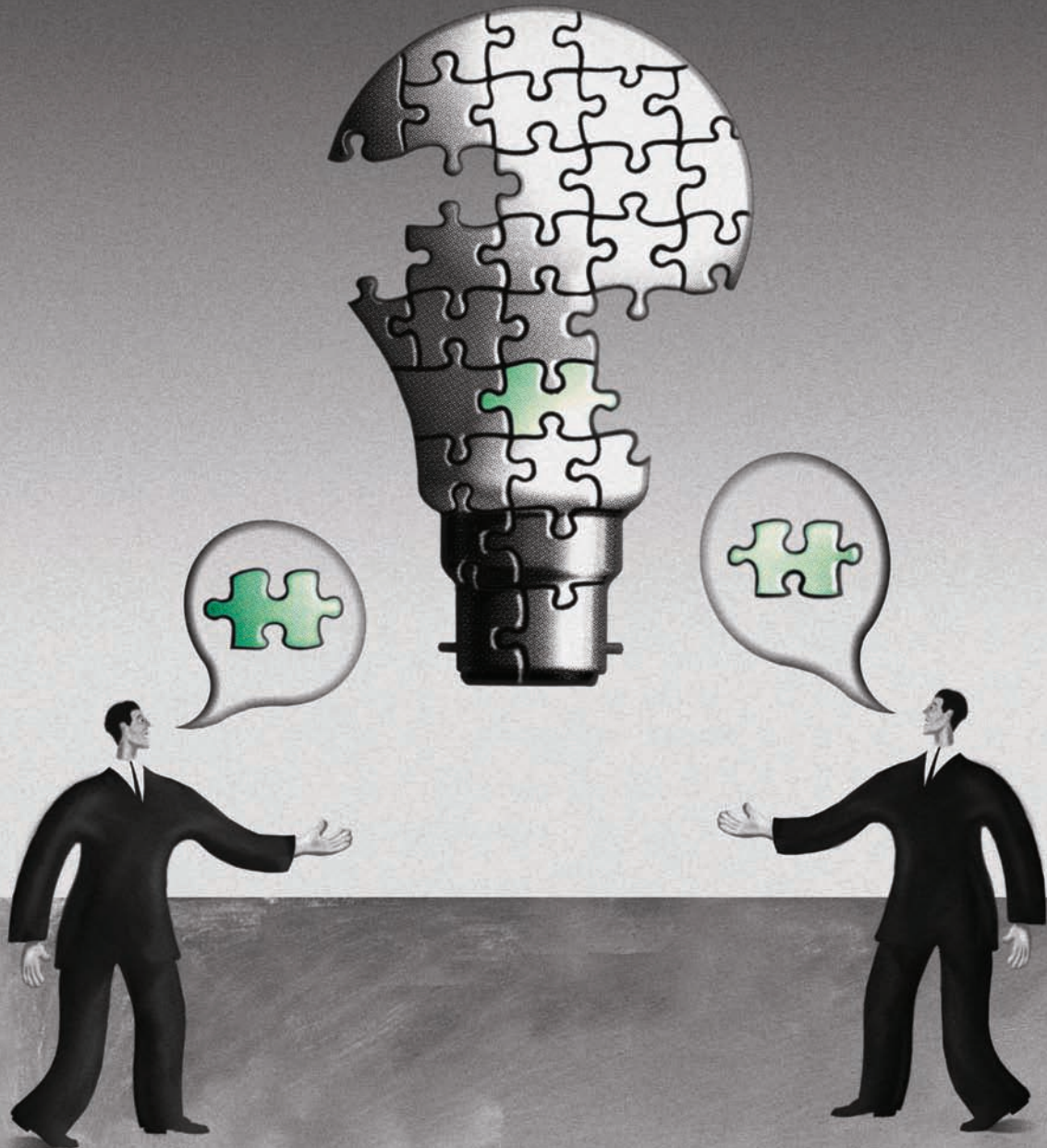
THOMAS, Howard. Impactful Management Research: The Importance of Finding the Voice of Practice in Management Research. (2010). *From Challenge to Change: Business Schools in the Wake of Financial Crisis*. 4-6. Research Collection Lee Kong Chian School Of Business.

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From Challenge to Change: Business Schools in the Wake of Financial Crisis

Essays from GFME Board Members



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Impactful Management Research: The Importance of Finding the Voice of Practice in Management Research¹

Howard Thomas: Dean, Lee Kong Chian School of Business, Singapore Management University & Alex Wilson: Research Fellow in Strategic Management, Warwick Business School, Warwick University



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Management research in business schools faces increasing internal and external criticism for the production of rigorous and theoretically grounded but irrelevant research (Mintzberg, 2004; Pfeffer, 2007). This criticism is compounded by often unfavourable comparisons between the academic stature of business schools relative to other professional schools (e.g. medicine, law and engineering) (Bennis and O'Toole, 2005; Khurana, 2007) and to the university communities which they reside (Starkey and Tiratsoo, 2007).

Management research must be considered both in terms of the competitive environment of business schools (Antunes and Thomas, 2007; Thomas, 2007) and the role of research in the management education process. It is particularly important to examine how research can energize and re-engage the brain and the voice of business schools in achieving a more effective strategic positioning in the context of the modern university. Ongoing debates suggest that there is a gap or imbalance between theory and practice in both management research and in management teaching. Business schools (and the various constituents of the research community), therefore, need to consider how best to escape their various *ivory towers* (Crainer and Dearlove, 1998) without sacrificing the academic rigour shown in other professional schools. Business schools may also need a renewed focus and engagement with the needs of practitioners.

The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB, 2007) report usefully examines the impact of management research in business schools: The authors of the report note that: "The rapid change in the size and stature of research in business schools has engendered passionate dialogue and debate. For example, business schools have recently been criticized for placing too much emphasis on research relative to teaching, and for producing research that is too narrow, irrelevant, and impractical" (AACSB, 2007: 10). Despite underlining the 'passionate dialogue and debate' that surrounds the purpose of research and the problematic relationship between theory and practice, the AACSB "...does not take a position in the ongoing debate about relevance vs. rigour" (AACSB, 2007: 11).

The AACSB report (2007) identifies three areas where the impacts of research are found: increasing disciplinary knowledge, contributions to the practice of management and pedagogical research. Within each of these areas the AACSB identify the intellectual contributions from business schools. For example, contributions to discipline-based scholarship are found in peer-reviewed journals, research monographs and across the output from scholarly meetings and seminars. Contributions to practice are to be found in professional or trade journals and magazines, reports and books, as well as from presentations and meetings between academics and practitioners and also in the "popular" business press. Finally, pedagogical contributions are made in articles and cases, manuals and textbooks, instructional software and in the design and debates on business school curricula.

¹ This essay is drawn from a much longer paper: 'An analysis of the environment and competitive dynamics of management research' by Howard Thomas and Alex Wilson, *Journal of Management Development*.

The report also provides a useful overview of where intellectual contributions from management research can be located. However, Davenport and Prusak (2003) suggest that there is limited transmission of new ideas for management or business from business schools. Even where the work of business school academics has been adopted in practice (by managers and by consultants) this has been through immediate channels (for example, Harvard Business Review) rather than through the high-impact rated scholarly (peer-reviewed) journals. So, while the output of management research may be aligned toward disciplinary knowledge, practice, pedagogy, or a combination of these, the impact on management practice generally is neither fully understood nor clear. Indeed, research by Baldrige et al. (2004) reveals a very weak correlation linking the academic quality of research with practical relevance.

It is important to recognize that the domain of management research is not exclusive to business schools. The uncomfortable gaps between theory and practice have meant that research (in a general sense) is sometimes conducted by management consultancies, specialist research firms and so-called 'gurus'. Whilst the attraction of hiring bespoke research is undoubtedly valuable because it is customized and unique to a particular organization, Schoemaker (2008: 131) observes that "[t]oo often, armchair speculation and guru books fill a void that should be addressed through relevant scholarship." Nonetheless, the ways of operating and success of these competitors supports the argument that business schools are not fully engaged with managers and management practice. If, as Schoemaker (2008: 125) writes, "competition is intense, and yet winning requires collaboration", then collaboration and learning are required between management consultancies, specialist research firms and 'gurus' to begin to unravel the complexities of management practice and the means of engagement.

There is a broad consensus that there are many instances of management research in business schools which are of limited relevance to management practice and that efforts to engage with practitioners are essential. The solutions to this controversy are extremely varied and include: Regaining management as a profession (Bennis and O'Toole, 2005; Khurana, 2007), developing a critical lens for conceptualizing managerial problems (Grey, 2004), evidence-based approaches (Pfeffer and Sutton, 2006b; Rousseau, 2006; Pfeffer and Sutton, 2007; Rousseau and McCarthy, 2007), adapting means of translation between theory and practice (Wensley, Forthcoming) or the ideological transformation of the business school as an institution (Starkey and Tiratsoo, 2007; Starkey and Tempest, 2008; Starkey and Tempest, Forthcoming). Our conjecture is not with any of the 'solutions' being offered, more on the state of the debate itself. The 'voice of practice' has become lost; the debates on practice are very much internal to the academic community – where is the voice of practice? Business schools need to devise appropriate patterns of linkage and engagement in order to be able to listen to the competing demands of management practitioners. If this is completed effectively, business schools will then be in an informed position to discuss the technicalities of engaging with management practice and thus produce results that become increasingly valuable to management.

We would argue that the current situation of only partial engagement with practice is sustained by institutionalized norms in management research through performance measures for individuals and institutions, the dominance of US, MBA models of management education and disciplinary cross-fire within management research. For example, the benchmarks and objectives for measuring practical relevance are largely internally generated. Quite often measures such as publication or media coverage of research output are taken to imply a level of engagement with practitioners. Simultaneously, "practice" is too often used as a catch-all term in much the same way 'the environment' was used to explain unintended consequences in early contingency theories of organization. Theory is inside business schools and practice is out there in the world of business. Taken to its logical conclusion, what practice is and where practice happens is often at the disposal of the researcher.

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Without finding a voice of practice, the practical impact of management research is largely an exercise in engineering and subsequently 'solving' research problems. This calls for, rather than a more sophisticated theory/practice debate, a more open and engaging debate with businesses, consultants, unions, trade associations, regional economic forums, various tiers of government and so on. Using these dialogues to find the voice of practice, management research is then better-positioned to adopt some of the more innovative solutions to engaging theory and practice already discussed.

However, we would also like to propose the additional consideration of 'consumption' as critical in understanding the relationship between theory and practice. Gabriel argues: "... organizational theories, like other commodities, are not used in a passive way, in general, but creatively, opportunistically and individualistically. In this, they resemble cooking recipes and cookery books, which different users employ or experiment with in widely differing ways, for widely differing ends" (Gabriel, 2002: 134). In this sense, it is neither the nature of what is practiced by management nor our understanding of practice by management research that renders research output actionable by practitioners; rather, it is the combined factors of dissemination and consumption that achieve this.

Our rationale for focusing on dissemination and consumption is twofold: The first relates to the numerous criticisms of the MBA degree and the political construction of its role in corporate failure. Certainly, the MBA and its relevance in, and for, contemporary management is problematic (c.f. *Managers not MBAs*; Mintzberg, 2004). However, we argue that the attribution of blame for corporate failure on business schools, particularly MBAs, is incomplete. Indeed the MBA may stand 'guilty as charged'. From our perspective, the absence of any analysis of dissemination and consumption of research (Gabriel, 2002) renders the cause-and-effect view between MBA education and corporate failure polemical. This critique questions the linear model of knowledge creation with business schools as knowledge creators and managers as consumers of knowledge. Secondly this approach can help towards building greater understanding of the consumption of theory from management research, which is inextricably linked to our first conjecture. The voice and character of 'practice' warrants closer attention, especially if progress is to be made through understanding practices of dissemination and consumption of management research. □



GFME

For further information about GFME contact:

Daniel R. LeClair

Vice President and Chief Knowledge Officer
AACSB International
777 S. Harbour Island Blvd, #750
Tampa, FL 33602
USA
Tel: 813-769-6507
Fax: 813-769-6559
E-mail: dan@aacsb.edu

Matthew Wood

Communications Director
European Foundation for Management
Development (EFMD)
Rue Gachard 88, box 3
1050 Brussels
Belgium
Tel: 32-2-6290810
Fax: 32-2-6290811

E-mail: matthew.wood@efmd.org
Website: www.gfme.org



Emerald Group Publishing Limited

For further information about Emerald contact:

Emerald Group Publishing Limited

Howard House
Wagon Lane
Bingley BD16 1WA
United Kingdom
Tel: +44 (0)1274 777700
E-mail: emerald@emeraldinsight.com
Website: www.emeraldinsight.com

America

Emerald Group Publishing Inc.

One Mifflin Place
Suite 400
Harvard Square
Cambridge
MA 02138
USA
Tel: + 1 617 576 5782

E-mail: america@emeraldinsight.com
Website: <http://info.emeraldinsight.com/northamerica>